

ECHOES OF THE SUBALTERN: MARGINALIZED VOICES IN SAADAT HASAN MANTO'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the overlooked perspectives portrayed in the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto. It attempts to address a significant gap and shed light on how marginalization is a shared experience across society and a universal dilemma. While Manto's vivid portrayals of pre-Partition India have been extensively studied, this research offers a focused platform to uncover the experiences of marginalization his stories capture. Drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory as a guiding framework, this study utilizes methods like Close Reading, Thematic Analysis, and Contextualization to explore these literary pieces deeply and find their underlying themes and messages. Through this analysis it seeks to show how literature serves as a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, revealing shared struggles and resilience while highlighting the influence of socio-political context on Manto's narratives. This study plays a role in raising awareness about the challenges faced by marginalized people, aiming to change how society views them and to influence perceptions and policy.

Introduction

Literature provides a space for marginalized people whose experiences are often ignored or silenced. Saadat Hasan Manto is particularly significant in this context because his stories portray the lives of people living on the margins of society, especially during the social and political upheaval surrounding the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Through his realistic and critical writing, Manto exposes issues of violence, gender inequality, social exclusion, and human suffering. This study examines how Manto represents subaltern voices and how their experiences reflect the wider socio-political conditions of his time.

Literature not only reflects society but also encourages readers to understand experiences different from their own. Through characters and narratives, readers can develop empathy and critically engage with social problems (Jia,

2023; Hammond & Kim, 2016). Realistic literature can therefore challenge accepted beliefs and draw attention to injustice. Manto's stories demonstrate this role by focusing on people who are often ignored by mainstream society. His portrayal of their struggles encourages readers to question social attitudes and recognize the humanity of marginalized individuals.

The term *subaltern* generally refers to groups that are excluded from dominant social, political, and economic structures. Literature can provide these groups with a space to express experiences that are otherwise overlooked. Spivak (2010), in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, highlights the difficulties marginalized groups face in being heard and represented. Manto's fiction engages with this problem by bringing the lives of socially and politically marginalized people into focus. His treatment

of women, victims of violence, and displaced individuals reveals both their vulnerability and their resilience.

Manto uses fiction to challenge dominant representations of society and to expose the suffering of marginalized people. Stories such as "Khol Do" and "Toba Tek Singh" portray the human consequences of Partition, particularly the experiences of women, refugees, and displaced individuals. Rather than presenting Partition only as a political event, Manto shows its impact on ordinary people (Ganie, 2018). His stories question social divisions and emphasize human dignity, making his portrayal of marginalized voices relevant beyond the historical period in which he wrote.

Problem Statement

Although Manto is widely recognized for portraying the realities of Partition, the experiences of his marginalized characters require further examination from a subaltern perspective. This study investigates how Manto represents marginalized voices and how these representations reflect the social and cultural conditions of his time. It focuses on issues of identity, exclusion, violence, and survival, while considering how Manto's characters challenge dominant social structures. The study also explores the continuing relevance of these representations to contemporary Pakistani society.

Research Objectives

1. Analyzing the portrayal of subaltern voices in the works of Saadat Hasan Manto, with a focus on themes of oppression, marginalization, and resilience.
2. Placing Manto's writing in the political context of India to explore how his stories are shaped by the cultural background of the region.
3. Examining the potential role of literature in amplifying the voices of the subalterns and shaping social consciousness, drawing insight from Manto's work to illustrate the power of storytelling for social impact.

Significance of the Study

Moreover, in contemporary Pakistani society, marginalized voices frequently remain unheard.

Literature can serve as a guiding light, drawing attention to these issues, especially when direct criticism of authorities may not be viable for various reasons. Manto's work vividly depicts the struggles of marginalized individuals and communities, bringing these concerns to light and providing a platform for silenced voices. This research extends beyond discussion; it has the potential to influence perceptions, policymaking, and creative pursuits, nurturing a more inclusive and empathetic society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Salim Akhtar explores the relevance of Manto in the contemporary era in his essay "Is Manto Relevant Today?" translated by Leslie A. Flemming (Flemming, 1985). He argues that an artist's enduring significance lies in their ability to resonate with readers across changing eras. According to Akhtar, a text's lasting impact and the reputation of its author hinge on a quality that sets the work apart, an essence that is subjective and varies from reader to reader. Akhtar credits Manto with pioneering realism in Urdu literature: Manto's writing authentically portrays themes of sex and sexuality, shedding light on concealed truths and taboo subjects. Through his stories, Manto exposes hypocrisy by delving into realities once shrouded in secrecy – recurrent motifs in narratives such as "A Wet Afternoon," "Colder than Ice," "Khushia," and "Mozail." Akhtar emphasizes the importance of contextualizing Manto's writing within the milieu of its time to fully appreciate its impact; in his stories, Manto viewed sex not as something separate from existence but as a metaphor for understanding the human mind and a reflection of life's complexities, and even as a form of protest.

Raza Rumi also contributes to the discussion on Saadat Hasan Manto by focusing on his portrayal of marginalized individuals such as sex workers and societal outcasts. Rumi sees Manto as a humanist who highlights the humanity in those society rejects, like prostitutes and swindlers. According to (Rumi, 2012), even these marginalized individuals can demonstrate more humanity than those perceived as pious or morally upright by society. Manto criticizes society's treatment of such individuals, poking fun at the norms that label them as "immoral" and "impure." Rumi suggests

that these portrayals offer insight into the motives of a society.

Another point of view is presented by (Gautam, 2022), who explores Manto's use of irony to convey political commentary, especially in his stories about Partition. By revealing the representation of violence in the narratives of India and Pakistan, Manto uses irony to communicate political messages regarding minority groups. In stories like "Cold Meat" and "Open It," he employs irony to reveal the harshness of those in power during the Partition unrest, while also showcasing the humanity displayed by marginalized communities. (Gautam, 2022) contends that Manto's work reflects his empathy for victims and his belief in the goodness of humanity. Additionally, within Manto's tales, the portrayal of prostitutes serves as a window into exploring contradictions and complexities within society. (Basu, 2022) examines how Manto's depiction of prostitutes sheds light on the darker side of urban progress, underscoring how human life is commodified within the world of prostitution. She argues that through his storytelling, Manto brings forward marginalized individuals facing stigma, challenging stereotypes and forcing readers to confront truths about female exploitation and objectification. Manto's detailed depiction brings an element of self-expression to these women, allowing them to assert their independence, a privilege frequently withheld in life.

Another significant contribution to the discourse on Manto is offered by (Das, 2020): Manto's short stories, like "Black Margins," feature glimpses of events described in a detached manner, painting a picture of senseless violence. In "Sorry," renamed as "Mistake" by Khalid Hasan, an error in identity post-mortem due to circumcision reflects the absurdity of brutality. Likewise, in "Jelly," a child's innocence takes a turn upon mistaking clotted blood for jelly. The story "Correction" narrates the tale of a Hindu man betrayed by his own kind after undergoing circumcision to save his life, underscoring the tragic futility of his actions. In "Appropriate Action," a Muslim couple seeks death from a Jain family to escape their fear-filled existence and is denied due to religious difference. (Das, 2020) adds that Manto's narratives offer a portrayal of the times

during Partition, presenting an unbiased documentation of this pivotal moment in South Asian history, conveying the anguish and trauma endured by those affected and highlighting the irrationality and chaos that gripped humanity during that era.

(Ranjan, 2018) believes that in the story "Khol Do," Sakina's mental state is shown through her detachment from the language of society: when the doctor tells her to "open it," she mechanically lowers her clothing, having faced repeated violations by volunteers. Manto depicts prostitutes as women with emotions and desires akin to any other woman, establishing himself as a key advocate for women's rights and feminism in literature through works like "Hatak" (*The Insult*). His focus on writing about prostitutes reflects his compassion for these marginalized individuals, shedding light on their suffering and mistreatment by society (Das, 2020). Initially working as a translator of literature under Mr. Bari's guidance, he drew inspiration from writers such as Gorky, Chekhov, Oscar Wilde, and Freud, leading him toward a style of realistic writing. His writing during India's Partition was so stark in its depiction of violence that the Progressive Writers Movement hesitated to embrace him, despite Manto's pioneering role within it. (Saeed, 2018) noted that Manto portrayed women as figures amidst the Partition, showcasing their endurance through atrocities such as abduction, gang rape, and family separation. Despite these challenges, the women displayed qualities of kindness, fortitude, and empathy even toward those perceived as adversaries. In narratives like "Hatak," Manto's depiction of sex workers as individuals with emotions of self-discovery and acts of kindness confronts societal norms and beliefs. Saughandhi, a sex worker in the story "Hatak," goes through a personal struggle after facing rejection, prompting her to embark on a soul-searching quest that empowers her to see through the facade of love and break free from her self-centered partner (Saeed, 2018).

Dr. S.Z. Abbas (Abbas, 2015) interprets Manto's portrayal of prostitution as a critique of a male-dominated system where women are treated as commodities exchanged for money. By delving into works like "Hatak" and "Behind the Reeds," he connects Manto's writing to

Simone de Beauvoir's idea that one becomes a woman rather than being born as one. In the story "Khol Do," Sakina returns to Pakistan traumatized by experiences with men from both sides of the border; her father misunderstands her reaction to opening the windows, mistaking it for a sign of life while overlooking the reality she faces. Manto's short stories are infused with romanticism, evoking empathy and exploring facets of human existence. His portrayal of sexuality empowers women by giving voice to their fears and curiosity – themes such as women's autonomy over their bodies and equal rights that remain pertinent today, underscoring Manto's continued relevance.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Saadat Hasan Manto has a great talent for giving a voice to those who are often unheard, depicting the struggles of the marginalized and oppressed with compassion and authenticity. His writing highlights the ordeals faced by women who endure violence, exploitation, and social exclusion, turning their stories into reflections on gender inequality and societal injustice. Manto's literary works can be viewed as advocating for these voices, such as:

"He raised the character of a prostitute...and familiarizes the reader with the humanity of women. His portrayals of domesticated women and prostitutes are unique for he associates unconventional attributes – for example, determination, will, not being content in every situation and above all the ability to laugh. But Manto also showed 'real' men who were unconventional and sensitive...and for this reason, readers consider him to be a mature feminist." (Rumi, Manto's women, 2015)

Manto's narratives also shed light on the longings and challenges of sex workers, portraying them with empathy and complexity. In *Ten Rupees*, Manto shares the tale of Sarita, a girl forced into prostitution by her mother. Despite her circumstances, Sarita finds happiness in small joys like riding in cars: *"Sarita is happy to hear that she will go for a ride. Sarita was very happy to hear that rich men with motor cars had come for her, granted she was more interested in motor cars than in the rich men who drove them."* (Manto S. H., 2009) Sarita's fascination with automobiles and her innocence are brought out as she engages with

clients for the thrill of the journey more than just for money; in one encounter she even declines the money offered to her, revealing her lack of interest in the transactional side of her profession. Manto paints a picture of Sarita's desires and innocent joy, offering a complex depiction of her character beyond mere victimhood. Dr. Afreen Faiyaz notes,

"Manto does not reason into their downfall, nor does he lament over their loss of innocence and grace. He only gives us a glimpse of that humane space which they have vicariously created for themselves in this hell for their sustenance. Most of the characters are condemned to a sordid existence; however, some of them transcend it." (Faiyaz, 2017)

Furthermore, Manto's stories shed light on women marginalized by violence, their voices silenced and histories erased. In "Khol Do," Sakina gains a voice when her father declares, "My daughter is alive" (Fair, 2022). Manto captures the hidden struggles of individuals, giving voice to the voiceless; though he cannot undo the injustices done to them, he immortalizes their suffering through his narratives.

In his book *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, Michel Foucault discusses the interplay between power and resistance, suggesting that power dynamics involve pushback rather than dominance alone. He challenges conventional views of power, arguing that it influences freedom rather than solely restricting it, and questions whether oppressive power alone can ensure compliance (Foucault, 1978). This viewpoint offers a useful lens on Manto's narratives, highlighting how the quiet defiance of characters like Sakina in "Khol Do" serves as a form of protest against societal injustice.

Saadat Hasan Manto uses his wit and adept irony to explore societal hypocrisy and moral decline, exposing the disparity between social norms and actuality. In his essay on prostitution (Haleem, 2023), Manto argues that prostitution serves needs and should not be hastily condemned: if there is demand in the market for this "product," it reflects a need that should not be overlooked, and the women involved in this trade are often reacting to a requirement established by society itself.

This notion is reflected in his story *Hatak*, where he portrays Saugandhi as a sex worker who defies easy classification. He showcases her

intricacy and strength, questioning conventional views of her profession. Saugandhi is portrayed as a woman with a "heart of gold," defined not by her job but by her kindness. Manto writes, "*Saugandhi was not as clever as she pretended. She didn't have a great number of clients either. She liked men, which was why all her clever methods would desert her when it was time to use them. It only took a few sweet words, softly cooed into her ear, to make her melt*" (Flemming S. H., 1985). Regardless of being in a profession often perceived as immoral, he portrays Saugandhi as someone who yearns for love but cannot find it. Manto writes, "*When a man said to her, 'I love you, Saugandhi,' she would go weak in the knees, although she knew he was lying. Love, what a beautiful word, she would think. Oh, if only one could rub love like a balm into one's body*" (Flemming S. H., 1985).

Manto highlights Saugandhi's compassion and benevolence, challenging perceptions of sex workers as lacking empathy. He recounts an incident where Saugandhi assists another woman, reassuring her, "*Don't worry, sister, my man is due back from Poona any day. He'll provide me with some money. You'll be on your way*" (Flemming S. H., 1985). Despite Saugandhi's kindness, she is taken advantage of and manipulated by individuals like Madhu, who exploit her situation. Manto sheds light on the exploitation Saugandhi faces, illustrating how she is both financially and emotionally drained by those around her. He writes, "*There is bad news though. I am in trouble. There was this police investigation I botched up and unless I can get twenty or thirty rupees together and bribe my inspector, I can say goodbye to my job*" (Flemming S. H., 1985). In a profession typically stigmatized by society, she displays qualities traditionally considered virtuous, a depiction that challenges the stereotypes associated with prostitution. Manto's storytelling implies that those deemed "respectable" in society may play a role in creating or perpetuating the circumstances faced by individuals like Saugandhi; these "respectable" figures often evade scrutiny, their wrongdoings hidden behind a facade of respectability, while individuals like Saugandhi bear the brunt of societal judgment. In short, Saugandhi's narrative stands as a critique of double standards and bias, shining a light on

the strength and dignity of those who are frequently sidelined and giving them a platform to share their stories.

Ayesha Jalal, Manto's niece and a historian, shares a related view in her book *The Pity of Partition*, asserting, "Whether he was writing about prostitutes, pimps or criminals, Manto wanted to impress upon his readers that these disreputable people were also human, much more than those who cloaked their failings in a thick veil of hypocrisy" (Jalal, 2013).

In another analysis, (Faizyaz, 2017) portrays Manto as an uncompromising realist and a rebel who spoke bluntly without sugarcoating his views. This raw realism is prominently displayed in *Khol Do*, where Sakina's traumatic experience unfolds as she is abducted from East Punjab, subjected to abuse by both her captors and her supposed saviors, while her father, Sirajuddin, desperately searches for her. Manto's use of irony shines through in this narrative: the boys who claim to help Sakina ultimately deceive Sirajuddin by hiding her from him, exemplifying the very evil they profess to oppose. Their false reassurances and prayers for success starkly contrast with their betrayal: "*Her hands groped for the cord that kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs. 'She is alive. My daughter is alive', Sirajuddin shouted with joy. The doctor broke into a cold sweat.*" (Fair, 2022)

Professor Beerendra Pandey contends that Manto's narratives lack sentimentality; rather than aiming to evoke emotion, his focus is on stimulating and challenging the intellect through empathy for marginalized characters facing life's realities. Gautam observes that irony in stories such as "Khol Do" functions as a kind of meta-irony, consistently revealing the shock of a character acting out a harrowing script – one in which she can no longer distinguish between predatory and sympathetic commands from men (Gautam, 2022). Manto's use of irony serves not just as a literary technique but also as a potent instrument for social criticism: he unveils the ethical decay concealed beneath societal conventions and questions the essence of respectability, exposing the paradox of a world where a father's joy at

finding his daughter alive is overshadowed by the true nature of her suffering.

The body of a female is portrayed as a battleground in Manto's tales, revealing how it is treated as a war weapon, contested terrain, and locus of conflict. Characters in these narratives struggle to conquer and dominate women's bodies, perceiving them as both conquest and sacrifice in warfare – a recurring theme that reflects a reality in which women become targets of animosity, fury, and retribution. In Manto's *Bitter Harvest*, Sharifan and Bimla fall victim to violence amid conflict among Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. The tale opens with Qasim's heart-wrenching discovery of his wife's body drenched in blood alongside his daughter Sharifan, who had been subjected to an ordeal of her own. The anguish of this loss pushes Qasim to the brink of madness and a quest for retribution:

"Qasim threw away the axe and pounced on her like a wild beast, throwing her to the ground. Then he began to tear at her clothes and for half an hour he ravaged her like an animal gone berserk. There was no resistance; she had fainted." (Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition, 2011)

In Qasim's distraught state, the individuals responsible for Sharifan's suffering are generalized as representatives of the Hindu or Sikh community, while Bimla becomes the focal point of his desire for justice. This twisted rationale positions Bimla as a target to compensate for the atrocities inflicted upon Qasim's loved ones; men from both sides manipulate women's fates to settle scores in the name of vendetta.

Both narratives of this kind highlight the violence inflicted on women's bodies during the Partition of India, when women were primarily defined by their bodies and seen as possessions to be either "protected" or "claimed" by men. Accounts of victims in these stories often focus on their attractiveness, reducing them to objects of desire. As Jalal notes, *"Three potent factors – Zan (women), Zar (wealth) and Zamin (land) ingrained in the material and patriarchal culture...played a critical role in shaping the nature of violence in 1947."* (Jalal, 2013) This objectification shifts women from individuals to symbols representing ideals: their bodies come to symbolize purity, virtue, and cultural

identity. In the chaos of Partition riots, many women were killed by their own relatives to safeguard family honor, with these deaths glorified as acts of sacrifice; women who endured assault often faced isolation, rejected by their community and shunned by society at large. Amnesty International highlights that rape is frequently employed as a tool of warfare to weaken enemy forces and establish dominance through fear and coercion (Sudan: Darfur: Rape as a weapon of war: sexual violence and its consequences, 2004), a dynamic Manto's Partition fiction captures decades before it entered the language of international human rights reporting.

In addition, within Pakistan and around the globe, various cultural barriers continue to hinder women from reporting incidents of sexual violence, reinforcing norms that also marginalize transgender individuals and force many to retreat from mainstream society due to rejection and violence. Despite the prevalence of such violence, many cases remain unreported; (Hancock, 2023) highlights that women often fail to report sexual assault to the police for a range of reasons, including victim-blaming attitudes and delays in the process. Even though it is difficult, sharing the experiences of marginalized groups, including women and transgender people, in public conversation is crucial. Manto's willingness to give voice and dignity to such figures nearly a century ago continues to bear directly on these ongoing struggles, helping to challenge entrenched beliefs and pave the way for a shift in attitudes toward inclusivity, justice, and support for everyone, irrespective of gender or identity.

CONCLUSION

Manto uses irony and empathy to expose the marginalization of vulnerable people. Through characters such as prostitutes and pimps, he explores dignity, identity, and survival under oppressive conditions. In his Partition stories, women's bodies often become sites of violence, reflecting communal conflict and patriarchy. From a Subaltern perspective, Manto challenges dominant narratives by giving visibility to silenced experiences. In *Hatak*, for example, Saugandhi is portrayed as a complex woman with dignity, vulnerability, and agency

rather than as a stereotype. Thus, Manto's fiction demonstrates how literature can challenge social inequality and promote a more humane understanding of marginalized lives.

Recommendations

1. They may apply feminist literary theories by Hélène Cixous and bell hooks to dive deeper into the portrayal of women in Manto's stories, examining the lack of representation of women in mainstream conversation and the ways his characters resist socio-cultural norms.

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